

The *Decameron* and Boccaccio's poetics

At the end of his Latin treatise on myth, the *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, Boccaccio delineates his understanding of poetry as a useful art: '[poetry] offers us so many inducements to virtue, in the warnings and teachings of poets whose care it has been to describe with sublime talent and utmost honesty, in exquisite style and diction, men's meditations on things of heaven' (xiv. 6. 8).¹ Whereas such a declaration of poetics is relatively unsurprising for a medieval reader of poets such as Virgil, Dante, or Petrarch, at first glance it seems difficult to apply it to Boccaccio's own works, especially the morally ambiguous *Decameron*, but also his early works, each of which explores the nature of human desire in a language that oscillates between the erudite and the plebeian. The sense of lowliness that results from the popular origins of Boccaccio's poetic practice seems out of place in this definition of poetry's moral utility and aesthetic sublimity. In order to understand the complex poetic system according to which Boccaccio's *Decameron* succeeds in overcoming the humble, even debased, nature of its material, we must retrace in broad strokes the history of his poetics from the point of view that he provides in the *Genealogia*.

Exquisite speech: the mechanics of Boccaccio's poetry

For Boccaccio, poetry distinguishes itself from other forms of discourse by its beauty. In the *Genealogia*, following Petrarch's definition of poetry in the *Epistolae familiares* (*Familiar Letters*) x. 4 and that of Isidore of Seville in *Etymologiae* (*Etymologies*) viii. 7, Boccaccio incorrectly traces the origins of the Latin word for poetry (*poesis*) not to the Greek word for 'making' (from *poiēō*), but to the Greek word for quality (*poiôtēs*), which he understood as meaning 'exquisite discourse' (xiv. 7. 2; p. 40). In the production of this kind of speech there are two key elements, a poetic fervour and an artistic skill, that together render ordinary speech inspired and sublime. The result of this kind of speech is a fiction that hides truth beneath an allegorical veil – a truth that, when disclosed, can have sublime effects:

Poetry . . . is a sort of fervour of exquisite invention, either in speech or writing, of that which you have invented or found. It proceeds from the bosom of God, and few, I find, are the minds in which this gift is born; indeed so wonderful a gift it is that true poets have always been extremely rare. The effects of this fervour of poetry are sublime: it impels the soul to a longing for speech; it brings forth strange and unheard-of inventions; it composes these meditations in a fixed order, it adorns the whole composition with unusual interweaving of words and ideas, and it conceals the truth in a fair garment of fiction . . . It can arm kings, marshal them for war, launch whole fleets from their docks, even describe the sky, land, and sea, adorn virgins with flowery garlands, portray human character in its various aspects, awake the idle, stimulate the dull, restrain the rash, subdue the criminal, and distinguish excellent men with the praise that they deserve. (XIV. 7. 2; pp. 39-40, modified)

Thus, for Boccaccio, poetry is a means to a sublime moral, political, and even contemplative end that depends on inspiration, technical ability, and the employment of allegorical discourse. The aesthetic ordering of poetic language recreates mimetically the marvellous ordering of the natural world in order to spur readers and listeners both to action and to contemplation.

Besides the effects of poetry and the artifice of its production, one of the main questions that this passage raises concerns the divine origins of poetic inspiration. In the same tradition as the aesthetic theory espoused by Virgil in *Inferno*, XI. 103-5, which maintains that 'our art follows Nature "as the learner does his master" . . . "for your art is nearly like God's granddaughter"', Boccaccio creates a tenuous link between art and God through Nature.² The poetic fervour that originates in the bosom of God seems to render poets vessels for the word of God. The etymology of one of the Latin words for poet, 'vates', was commonly understood to be derived from 'vas Dei', vessel of God, which was also a way of referring to Christ, the perfect embodiment of God on earth. For Boccaccio, however, if the poetic word 'proceeds from the bosom of God', it is because poetic creation emerges from the material of the natural world of history, or 'Natura naturata'. The poet imitates the creative function of God in nature, or 'Natura naturans', aesthetically organizing his words in the creation of poetic worlds like the gardener his flowers. In this way, poetic creation looks on to the divine through the filter of nature and creates links between human experience and the creator. These links reside within the closed, veiled discourse of *recondite* and highly ornate speech, or poetry.

Whereas the sublime effects of poetry are guaranteed by the semantic depth of allegorical discourse, the beauty of poetry resides for Boccaccio in its ordering. The exquisiteness of poetic speech derives from 'song in an age hitherto unpolished', after which poets applied to their words 'measured

periods', 'the standard of fixed rules', and 'a definite number of feet and syllables' (*Genealogia*, xiv. 7. 4; p. 41). During the course of his own poetic career Boccaccio explores the expressive possibilities of both Latin and the vernacular in a more or less allegorical kind of fiction that is founded nevertheless on verisimilar human experiences. He makes use of a vast variety of poetic schemes, tropes, metres, and macro-textual structures in order to open a dialogue with his readers about natural, ethical, and theological truths.

Boccaccio's first real poetic work, from the early 1330s, the *Caccia di Diana*, was composed in the eleven-syllable lines of Dante's *terza rima* (a-b-a-b-c-b-c-d-c). Loosely modelled on Dante's lost *sirventese*, praising the sixty most beautiful women of Florence, mentioned in Chapter vi of the *Vita nova*, the *Caccia* represents Boccaccio's first effort at combining a courtly literature about love with the tradition of moral allegory in the interpretation of classical myth. He playfully combines Dante's stilnovistic language of love with the moralized Ovidian transformation of fifty-eight women of the Neapolitan court. By modelling his poem of moral metamorphosis through love on a poem that Dante did not include in his own narrative of self-transformation, Boccaccio is situating his own work as marginal with respect to Dante's poetry. Boccaccio was also explicitly combining the vernacular poetics of Dante's *Comedy* with Ovid's mythical content; both authors would remain key points of reference for Boccaccio's poetics throughout his career. Later on, in the *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio will again make use of *terza rima* in a more explicit effort to vernacularize the classical tradition, according to the form of the *Comedy*, and to put into dialogue the content and themes of classical and medieval literature, from Ovid, Virgil, and Homer to the courtly literature of France and the love poets of Sicily and Tuscany. In both of these works Boccaccio shows a predilection for figures such as the acrostic and anaphora, and even for numerological signification. Boccaccio's language in these poems is highly affected and influenced both by classical authors such as Ovid and by vernacular lyric poets such as Dante. In them, especially, readers get a sense of the artificiality and recondite knowledge latent in the poetic ordering of knowledge.

Composed around the same time as the *Caccia di Diana*, the *Filostrato* tells the story of Troiolo and Criseida in the rhyming stanzas of *ottava rima* (a-b-a-b-a-b-c-c). Boccaccio's invention and development of the literary octave derives from a popular metrical form in which the medieval *cantare*, or vernacular romance, was recounted. Boccaccio establishes the form as literary by virtually eliminating its redundant four-part structure (i.e. 2 + 2 + 2 + 2) in favour of the more versatile two-part structure

(usually, 4 + 4 or 6 + 2), which renders the stanza more flexible and capable of handling both lyric and narrative moments.³ With a balanced bipartite structure, Boccaccio was able to express more freely and with more syntactical complexity the emotions of his characters, such as in the following example from Criseida's lament in the *Filostrato*:

Oimè lassa, trista e dolorosa,
 ch'a me conven portar la penitenza
 del tuo peccato! Cotanto noiosa
 vita non merital per mia fallenza.
 O verità del ciel, luce pietosa,
 come sofferi tu cotal sentenza,
 ch'un peccchi ed altro pianga, com'io faccio,
 che non peccai e di dolor mi sfaccio?

(IV. 94; p. 135)

[Alas, weary, sad and pained that I must bear the penitence for your sin! I did not deserve such a vexing life for my mistake. O truth of heaven, light of pity, how can you suffer such a sentence, that one sins and the other suffers, as I do, who did not sin and am now undone with pain?]

Another form of the bipartite structure, with a semantic unity expressed in the first six lines, followed by a contrast or concluding phrase of two lines, allowed for a more complex Latinate syntax in the narration of events. This form can be seen in the following description of Troilo's search for Diomedes at the end of the *Filostrato*:

E spesse volte insieme s'avvisaro
 con rimproveri cattivi e villani,
 e di gran colpi fra lor si donaro,
 talvolta urtando, e talor nelle mani
 la spada avendo, vendendosi caro
 insieme molto il loro amor non sani;
 ma non avea la Fortuna disposto
 che l'un dell'altro fornisse il proposto.

(VIII. 26; p. 223)

[And often they both saw each other and met with evil and villainous reproaches, and they struck each other with great strength, sometimes clashing, sometimes with their sword in their hands, each madly giving the other his due; but Fortune had not disposed for the one to decide the end of the other.]

We can compare these two stanzas from Boccaccio's poem with one from the popular *Cantare di Fiorio e Biancifiore*, which Boccaccio would retell in prose in the *Filocolo*. This version of the *Cantare* comes from the oldest

of the datable *cantari* manuscripts, copied around 1343 (although the story was told in *cantare* form in Italy from at least the thirteenth century):

E preson la cristiana molto bella
da poi che le avean morto lo marito.
Ella dicea: 'O lasa, tapinella,
dolorosa, son giunta a mal partito!
Gran gioia ne fazea la gente fella,
guardandola nel viso colorito:
davanti a lo re la presentaro,
e' quel presente ben lo tene caro.⁴

[And they took the very beautiful woman after they had killed her husband. She said: Alas poor little me, sadly I have reached an evil end! Great joy did the bad men take, looking at her flushed face. They presented her to the king, and he took that present and held it close.]

The *cantare*'s melodic singsong rhythm is avoided for the most part in Boccaccio's version of the octave, with its complex syntactical and rhythmic structures which reinforce his poems' status as literary artefacts meant to be read and studied.

Later on, at the beginning of the 1340s, Boccaccio would definitively institute the *ottava rima* as the metrical form of the vernacular epic, by again intermixing the material of classical epic and the themes of courtly and stilnovist love poetry in the *Teseida*. *Terza rima* was associated with the Dantesque moralizing dream vision and the prosimetrum was a form for autobiographical philosophical reflection, in the tradition of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* (*On the Consolation of Philosophy*) in Latin and Dante's *Vita nova* in the vernacular. *Ottava rima*, however, was more suited to the combination of classical epic and love poetry, since it had already been employed in popular culture to recount the love-epic of the medieval romance. In the years immediately prior to the composition of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio would go on to compose the *Ninfale fiesolano*, again in octaves. Here Boccaccio attempts to compose a pastoral aetiological poem with the language and form of popular poetry. It is an adaptation of the model of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to new poetic forms in a 'pseudo-popular' and impressionistic language that is more limpid and versatile than his earlier attempts.⁵ This development resulted in the establishment of the octave as the vernacular version of the hexameter, capable of expressing in verse a broad range of human experience, from the horrors of war to the passions of love.

Boccaccio's main innovations, however, lie in the creation of a vernacular prose that could absorb the multiplicity of themes that had been the realm

of verse in the classical and medieval traditions. The first instance of his work in literary prose is the *Filocolo*, also connected to the tradition of Old French romance and popular *cantari*, which tells the story of Floris and Blancheflour. To a greater extent than the octave, prose allows Boccaccio to retell this well-known story of love within a learned apparatus that engages with classical and medieval poetic sources at the same time as it exploits the encyclopaedic tradition of the medieval *summa*. The prose of the *Filocolo* is still immature compared to that of the *Decameron*, in that the language is not as capable of expressing with ease both an internal reality of sentiment and an external reality of events.

The *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* engages with the classical tradition (Virgil, Ovid, Apuleius) and with Dante's *Comedy* through the form of the pastoral prosimetrum, alternating between prose and *terza rima*. The allegorical meditations of the portions in verse are in clear contrast with the prose sections, whose language oscillates between 'eccentric' and 'archaic' and 'plebeian and vernacular'.⁶ With the prose of the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, Boccaccio succeeds at developing a language capable of representing the psychological complexities of human sentiment. Here again, however, the language is affected and calculated, inasmuch as it imitates and transforms the tragic tone of Seneca's tragedies and the elegiac tone of Ovid's *Heroides*, pitting them against one another in an effort to create a tragic-elegiac register in the vernacular.

Boccaccio's work expands the literary range of the Tuscan vernacular by melding the forms of popular literature and of the limited vernacular tradition with classical themes and content, creating a hybrid language that bridges the popular with the erudite. In the *Buccolicum carmen*, his major work of Latin poetry, too, Boccaccio chooses the form of the eclogue, written in dactylic hexameters, which the late antique grammarian Servius had described as the lowest of the styles practised by the Roman poet Virgil. Boccaccio's Latin pastorals situate his work as the modern-day standard-bearer of the ancient *modus humilis*, or low style, as it aligns him with the Virgil of the *Bucolics*, not of the *Aeneid*. His Latin resembles most closely that of Virgil, although there are resonances throughout of other late antique and medieval bucolic poets as well as of Dante's *Comedy*.⁷ The Latin Boccaccio's humble stance allows him to be considered together with the vernacular Boccaccio, inasmuch as both are concerned with finding poetic forms and languages in consonance with the multiplicity of human experience.

Throughout his prose works in the vernacular and in Latin Boccaccio follows to a varying extent the medieval Latin prose style of the *cursus*,

a system of rhythmic phrase endings. By 1351, after his meeting with Petrarch, Boccaccio follows less and less the rules of medieval prose composition, modelling instead his Latin prose on the classical style of Cicero and Livy. As far as his vernacular works are concerned, by the time of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's use of the *cursus* as a model is sporadic and almost casual.⁸ Furthermore, the origin of Boccaccio's prose in medieval *cantari* led him to employ versified prose in which attentive readers can hear various metres, including eleven-syllable and seven-syllable lines (hendecasyllables and septenaries), and other metres. Boccaccio's poetic career leads to the conclusion that, for all of the formal differences between prose and verse, both forms can be subsumed beneath the category of 'poetry'.⁹ In fact, in conclusion to his definition of poetry in the *Genealogia*, he does not differentiate between rhetoric and poetry in terms of form, but instead in terms of purpose and intention. For Boccaccio, the study of rhetoric, along with the other liberal arts, was necessary for the poet, but rhetoric was not synonymous with poetry. In response to those who equate the two arts, Boccaccio declares: 'Although rhetoric has also its own inventions, it has no part among the coverings ('integumenta') of fiction, for whatever we compose beneath the veil of allegory ('sub velamento') and set forth exquisitely, is poetry and poetry alone' (xiv. 7. 8; p. 42, modified). The difference between the language of the poet and that of the orator resides in the poet's inspired intention to communicate truth beneath a beautiful fictional covering.

Summary Table of Works and Forms

Title	Form
<i>Caccia di Diana</i>	Allegorical poem in <i>terza rima</i>
<i>Filostrato</i>	Romance in <i>ottava rima</i>
<i>Filocolo</i>	Romance in prose
<i>Teseida</i>	Romance/Epic in <i>ottava rima</i>
<i>Amorosa visione</i>	Allegorical dream vision in <i>terza rima</i>
<i>Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine</i>	Allegorical pastoral prosimetrum (prose + <i>terza rima</i>)
<i>Elegia di madonna Fiammetta</i>	Sentimental novel in prose
<i>Ninfale fiesolano</i>	Pastoral aetiological poem in <i>ottava rima</i>
<i>Decameron</i>	Framed collection of short stories in prose
<i>Corbaccio</i>	Allegorical dream vision in prose
<i>Buccolicum carmen</i>	Collection of Latin eclogues in dactylic hexameters

History and allegory: the development of Boccaccio's poetics

In addition to his innovations across a wide range of literary forms and registers Boccaccio demonstrates a concerted effort to expand poetry's possibilities for meaning. Indeed, for Boccaccio, poetic language is intricately connected to literary form. In another definition of the work of poets from the *Genealogia*, Boccaccio concedes to his critics that poets are 'tale-tellers' ('fabulosos homines'). He goes on to define poetry as the composition of tales, or 'fabulae', and traces the etymology of the term 'fabula' back to the verb '*for, faris*, hence "conversation," which means only "talking together"' (XIV. 9. 3-4; p. 47). The exquisite speech of poets is connected to the dialogic language of conversation and commerce, but also to the speech of Christ and the exemplary stories (*exempla*) often recounted for moral edification in sermons and in tractates. Key to the moral function of these tales was allegorical discourse, known as *figura* for the Bible and *integumentum* for secular texts, which prized the internal philosophical meaning of texts over the fictional outer covering.

Following the late antique philosopher Macrobius,¹⁰ Boccaccio goes on to describe four kinds of tale within this system of meaning: (1) the animal tale of Aesop, whose outer layer is entirely fantastic, but whose inner layer contains moral truths; (2) the mythic tale, whose outer layer mixes the fantastic with the true and whose inner truth is both human and divine; (3) the verisimilar tale, used by epic poets like Virgil and comic poets like Plautus and Terence, which is more similar to history ('historia') than to fiction ('fabula') since the story's meaning is found in the letter; and (4) the kind of old-wives' tale that contains no truth at all (XIV. 9. 5-8, pp. 48-9).

With the exception of this last brand of tale, Boccaccio writes, each kind of fiction can be found not only in the poetry of Graeco-Roman authors, but also in the Bible itself, especially in the words of the prophets, of Solomon, and of Christ. Again linking beauty and morality, Boccaccio declares that 'such is the value of fables that the unlearned may enjoy the fictional covering while the talents of the learned may work on the hidden truths; and thus in one reading the latter are edified and the former delighted' (XIV. 9. 15). Adapting the Horatian dictate from the *Ars poetica* (343) that the best writers mix the useful with the delightful ('miscuit utile dulci'), Boccaccio divides the two effects of poetry according to the capabilities of readers, assigning the delightful to the unlearned and the useful to the learned. This division at the core of Boccaccio's poetic theory will be essential to understanding the poetics of the *Decameron*, but it is useful to review first the process of poetic development that brought him to this point. Within the course of his

career Boccaccio experimented especially with the second and third kinds of storytelling that he delineates in the *Genealogia*, developing historical and mythic fables, often either blending the two within an allegorical interpretative structure or inserting allegorically charged moments (such as dreams or visions) into the narratives.

Throughout Boccaccio's oeuvre there is a consistent engagement with the historical world as the realm of human interaction and of contact between human and superhuman forces. Yet the Latin term used to describe this kind of poetic world, *historia*, denotes both a narrative form and, in its adjectival acceptation *hystorialis*, a specific level of exegesis. In patristic and later medieval modes of interpreting the Bible there were four exegetical levels: the historical, the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical, where the allegorical level signalled the way in which the Old Testament prefigured the events of the New Testament and the anagogical level the prefiguration of future Christian history, such as the afterlife or the apocalypse. Non-biblical texts could be interpreted in a similar manner, with the exception that, unlike the Bible, the historical level was fictional and that often there was only a single (usually moral) figural interpretation. Dante, however, in the letter to Cangrande pointed out the four levels of allegory of the *Comedy*, with the radical claim that the truth of the poem follows the paradigm of the Bible. By focusing on the historical foundations of allegorical discourse, both in its representation and in its interpretation, Boccaccio is in accord with Dante and other late medieval interpreters, who located the origin of figurative meaning in a literal, or historical, interpretation of a text. History offered the assurance (or illusion) of objectivity for interpretation and allowed for the autonomy of texts from often-spurious exegetical apparatuses.

Boccaccio's earliest fictions oscillate between overtly allegorical fiction and the history-like representations of medieval romance, which were linked to the same kind of mixed verisimilar poetics as ancient epic. The *Caccia di Diana* is an allegorical narrative poem with clear historical referents in the Neapolitan court of Boccaccio's time, while the *Filostrato* is a pseudo-historical narrative with foundations in the medieval romance tradition. Boccaccio's authorial stance in the *Filocolo* is one of historical recovery: the popular tale of love and marriage is framed by Fiammetta's injunction to save the story from the hands of the ignorant (i.e. the composers of the popular *cantari*). With the *Teseida*, Boccaccio blends the two forms of representation at the same time as he separates them. The epic is accompanied by a series of glosses written by the author himself in order to establish the modes of the poem's interpretation between the historical (glosses that explain the materiality of ancient culture) and the allegorical (glosses that explain the significance of various gods).

In his Florentine fiction, with works such as the *Ninfale fiesolano* and the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, but also the *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio moves from a recognizably historical and verisimilar representation of a past world (whether Troy, Athens, or Naples) to a more openly fantastic world of the mythical past populated by nymphs and heroes. The dream vision of the *Amorosa visione* mediates between the two forms of poetry by staging the protagonist/narrator's encounter with ekphrases of gods and men in a moral-allegorical journey through literary history. These works represent, on the one hand, a turn towards the mythic, and, on the other, the recognition of a historical, human element within mythical allegories. The *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* is a blend of the verisimilar story of a historical, embodied individual with the possibility of allegorical interpretation expected from mythical discourse. The characters that populate Boccaccio's early historical and mythical fictions are roughly verisimilar figures that also have allegorical meanings. As his career progresses and his literary language becomes more versatile, the worlds and characters that he creates gain in complexity.

In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio continues to be concerned with similar questions of poetics: with the formation of a literary vernacular capable of expressing the complete range of embodied human experience, with forms of verisimilar representation, and with the metaphorical language at the heart of allegorical discourse. Although the *Decameron* is unique among Boccaccio's works for its scope and variety, it is the culmination of the poetic work that preceded it.

Embodied histories and sublime interpretations: the poetics of the *Decameron*

Boccaccio's language in the *Decameron's* prefatory sections, self-defences, and conclusion is highly ornate, with roots in the medieval rhetorical tradition, while the language of the tales of the first nine days is extremely varied and representative of an objective historical reality recognizable by its readers as verisimilar. Boccaccio adapts his style and language to the various contexts of each narrative moment. In Day x, the influence of the *cursus* of the medieval rhetorical tradition returns, signalling the higher aspirations of the storytellers. Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, examined Boccaccio's prose style in the *Decameron* and came to the conclusion that, while it fails to elicit the *pathos* of Dante's *Comedy*, it succeeds in imitating the language of life in the *piazza* as no other work before it.¹¹ The linguistic variety and fluid style of the *Decameron's* tales belie the artistry behind them in their very simplicity. With the help of a historically and geographically rooted

language Boccaccio can give the illusion of representing reality objectively in his stories. He was not interested in merely representing reality for its own sake, however, but in offering these pleasurable stories to his readers so that they could reflect on reality according to their own intellectual abilities.

In the Proem to the *Decameron* Boccaccio declares that his work will be a compilation of 'stories or fables or parables or histories' recounted in order to cure lovesick ladies, whose leisure both condemns them to contemplate endlessly their state of unhappiness and permits them to read lovely stories in the vernacular (Proem, 13; p. 3). The women's lovesickness is framed by the literal disease of the plague of 1348, which, Boccaccio writes, had led women to show their naked bodies to male servants in order to be cured (Introduction to Day 1, 29). The tales of the *Decameron* return to a ground zero of poetic signification, where there are no Muses dressed in the sublime veils of allegory, but instead the nude bodies of women set before the gaze of the examining physician. By staging his audience as women and himself as the doctor capable of curing them, Boccaccio overtly restricts the poetic value of the tales to the purposes of delight and seemingly abandons all pretensions to utility for the men of universities, cloisters, and courts. In fact, in the Conclusion (§7), at the end of the 100 tales, Boccaccio points out that his stories were told in a garden and should not be held to the same criteria as the sermons of the clergy or the discourses of the learned. The question begged by Boccaccio's authorial stance as a man writing for women in a place of aesthetic pleasure is whether or not there is a poetics of the *Decameron* that allows for anything other than the joy of its readers. Or in other words, is there a vernacular poetics that can provide anything but solace?

To begin to answer this question, I would like to examine two points within the frame of the *Decameron* in which Boccaccio pre-empts potential attacks that he might receive from critics: the Introduction to Day IV and the Conclusion. At stake in both defences of the work is the nature of a poetic language founded on verisimilitude. In the first response to critics who accuse him of an inappropriate use of the language of desire, Boccaccio responds with the story of the widower Filippo Balducci and his son, who has grown up in isolation and without a mother on the top of Mount Asinaio. In an effort to save his son from the pain that derives from the love of women, Filippo has given him no knowledge of the world of desire. During his first trip to Florence, however, the son is overcome by a marvel for the things of the world and asks his father to name each and every thing with which they come into contact. When he sees a group of women for the first time the son asks his father what they are called; Filippo responds metaphorically,

‘Goslings’ (Introduction to Day IV, 23; p. 287). Unaffected by the father’s effort to avert his desire by changing the name of its object, the son responds by saying that he wants to take one home with him so that he can ‘pop things into its bill’ (§28; p. 287). The father is forced to take up the inadvertent sexual metaphor of the gosling’s bill in his retort: ‘Their bills are not where you think, and require a special sort of diet’ (§29; p. 287).

Filippo’s failure to control his son’s desire with figurative language leads into Boccaccio’s conclusion that the father’s ‘wits were no match for Nature’ (§29; p. 287). The tale of Filippo Balducci is meant to show that metaphorical language cannot circumvent the natural desires behind the son’s naming of the things of the world, because the meaning expressed by language follows a speaker’s intentions. Boccaccio does not necessarily advocate that his readers should blindly follow their natural appetites, but he recognizes that the figurative language of poetry does not have the power to change things merely by renaming them. Boccaccio thus defends the language of the *Decameron*, which represents as if unveiled the desires and pitfalls of an embodied world.

Similarly, in the Conclusion, Boccaccio defines his verisimilar poetics in terms of the realist artistic style of his day. In response to those who would accuse him of having taken too many liberties with his language, Boccaccio writes that it should be considered no more improper of him to have used ‘one or two trifling expressions . . . too unbridled’ than it is for those who use the transparently pornographic metaphors of everyday speech to describe sexual anatomy (§6; p. 798).¹² His own language, like the women who show their nude bodies to physicians, exposes the metaphors whose outer appearance gives the illusion of good taste; like the tales he tells with it, his language is verisimilar even as it is figurative. In order to justify this stance, Boccaccio invokes the authority of naturalist painters, who do not shy away from sexual realism:

Besides, no less latitude should be granted to my pen than to the brush of the painter, who without incurring censure, of a justified kind at least, depicts Saint Michael striking the serpent with his sword or his lance, and Saint George transfixing the dragon wherever he pleases; but that is not all, for he makes Christ male and Eve female, and fixes to the Cross, sometimes with a single nail, sometimes with two, the feet of Him who resolved to die thereon for the salvation of mankind. (§§5–6; p. 799)

Boccaccio’s realism, even when it transgresses the boundaries of a socially appropriate sexual vocabulary, is similar to that of the painters of fourteenth-century Italy, who are given licence to depict with verisimilitude the religious figures of Christianity, from the saints to Christ himself,

even when those very images represent either the sexuality of Christ and Eve or objects with highly sexual figurative connotations (i.e. 'nail', 'sword', 'lance'). In this passage, Boccaccio highlights the ambiguity of the sacred and the profane in his style. Just as sacred images may potentially be interpreted lewdly, so lewd language contains the potentiality of the sacred. Boccaccio thus defends his engagement with the world through a naturalist, poetic language that represents the world in its embodied nakedness. As is true for painting, however, the more *realistic* a representation, the more evident is the intervention of the artist's talents.

Thus when faced by the tales of the *Decameron* that recount, in the vernacular language of the town-square, the moral and sexual freedom of an increasingly secular world, we are asked to consider them in the same way in which we would treat religious iconography: as both historical and figurative representations. This poetics, in line with his thought on poetry in the *Genealogia*, seems contrary to Boccaccio's declaration in the Proem that his stories are merely for the pleasure of his lovesick female readers. There is, however, a connection between these real women and his pretensions for poetic authority that becomes clear in another passage from the defence in the Introduction to Day iv. Here he declares that if he is writing for and of women, then he should not be condemned for it, because he is doing something similar to the love poets of the previous generation. His women, he says, are not so different from the muses who live on Mount Parnassus, but since 'one cannot actually live with the Muses, any more than they can live with us', he must content himself with their embodied representation as women (§35; p. 289). In fact, he says that:

the Muses are ladies, and although ladies do not rank as highly as Muses, nevertheless they resemble them at first sight . . . And so, in composing these stories, I am not straying as far from Mount Parnassus or from the Muses as many people might be led to believe. (§35; p. 289)

Boccaccio's women are embodiments of the Muses – and he gives the impression that real women are to be preferred precisely because they are present and embodied. In the *Decameron* the poetics of the historical world, populated with sexed and desiring bodies that speak in a specifically female-gendered vernacular language, is linked to the sublime lyrical poetics of Dante, Cino da Pistoia, and Guido Cavalcanti, whom he invokes here in his defence. Only through the mechanism of the frame can Boccaccio bridge the gap between the tales of historical, embodied life and the lyric reflection on divine matters.

The question of the poetic production of meaning in the *Decameron* is best addressed by turning back to the theory of genres in the *Genealogia*, in which

Boccaccio declares that old wives' tales are meaningless. In the chapter of the *Genealogia* that follows this initial definition, Boccaccio redeems somewhat the usefulness of such tales:

it must be believed that not only great men – who were brought up on the milk of the Muses, frequented the homes of philosophy, and have been hardened by sacred studies – have always placed the most profound meanings in their poems, but also that there is nowhere such a delirious old woman who, around the household fire among the wakeful on winter nights, makes up and recites stories of Hell, or fairies, or nymphs, and the like (from which these inventions are often composed), and does not intend beneath the pretext of the stories, in accordance with the powers of her modest intellect, some meaning, sometimes not at all ridiculous; a meaning through which she would like to cause terror in children, delight girls, or tease the old, or at least show the powers of Fortune.

(XIV. 10. 7; p. 54, modified)

This kind of tale seems to be the model for the stories of the *Decameron*, at least as far as concerns the *brigata*, who tell each other stories to pass their free time with pleasure.¹³ By embedding the 100 tales within the multiple diegetic layers of the frame – the members of the *brigata*, the source who reports the stories, the narrator for women, and the author of the book – different kinds of utility, or meaning, can be gleaned from the different levels of discourse.

The ironic distance between author and tale created by the frame of the *Decameron* acts not only to detach Boccaccio's authorial intentionality from the import of the tales, so that the intentions of the ten fictional storytellers become separated from those of narrator and author. It also allows the reactions of the members of the *brigata* to exist on a separate plane from those of the *Decameron's* readership. The popular stories of the *Decameron* can take on more sublime meanings in different interpretative contexts, if they are seen as related to the historical foundation of allegorical discourse. The ambiguity created by the multiple diegetic levels causes a crisis of interpretative authority, which calls into question the effectiveness of all external hermeneutic systems and gives the text autonomy.

The initial interpretative level of the *Decameron* is based on a poetics of the verisimilar, which Fiammetta defends in her critique of Neifile's tale at the beginning of the fifth tale of Day IX. In the fourth tale, Neifile had recounted a story that inverted the historical attributes of its characters – both named Cecco. In the opening remarks of her own story, the last of the Calandrino tales, Fiammetta describes the importance of verisimilitude for pleasure:

'I could easily have told it [the story] in some other way, using fictitious names, had I wished to do so; but since by departing from the truth of what actually happened, the storyteller greatly diminishes the pleasure of his listeners, I shall . . . tell it in its proper form.'

(IX. 5. 5; p. 669)

As Fiammetta represents it, the poetics of the *brigata*'s stories is founded upon the verisimilar narration of events in a corresponding realistic language.

The second layer of interpretation corresponds to the moral utility that a plague-ridden society might glean from the tales. It is in turn embedded in the fiction of the consolation of lovelorn ladies, whose spiritual malady is embodied by the political and ethical breakdown of the city. This exegetical level is demonstrated most clearly in the description of the garden in the Introduction to Day III:

In the central part of the garden (not the least, but by far the most admirable of its features), there was a lawn of exceedingly fine grass, of so deep a green as to almost seem black, dotted all over with possibly a thousand different kinds of gaily-coloured flowers, and surrounded by a line of flourishing, bright green orange- and lemon-trees, which, with their mature and unripe fruit and lingering shreds of blossom, offered agreeable shade to the eyes and a delightful aroma to the nostrils. In the middle of this lawn there stood a fountain of pure white marble, covered with marvellous bas-reliefs. From a figure standing on a column in the centre of the fountain, a jet of water, whether natural or artificial I know not, but sufficiently powerful to drive a mill with ease, gushed high into the sky before cascading downwards and falling with a delectable splash into the crystal-clear pool below. And from this pool, which was lapping the rim of the fountain, the water passed through a hidden culvert and then emerged into finely constructed artificial channels surrounding the lawn on all sides. Thence it flowed along similar channels through almost the whole of the beautiful garden, eventually gathering at a single place from which it issued forth from the garden and descended towards the plain as a pure clear stream, furnishing ample power to two separate mills on its downward course, to the no small advantage of the owner of the palace.

(§§8–10; pp. 190–1)

This passage is a visualized description of how the pleasure principle of the *Decameron*'s tales is connected to utility beyond the boundaries of the text. The flowered field corresponds to the flowers of speech and rhetoric that make up its narratives. The description of the font at the centre of the garden is reminiscent of Boccaccio's declaration in the *Genealogia* that poetic inspiration arises from the 'bosom of God'. The flowers and trees of the garden are not only aestheticized versions of the natural world, but also the sensorial stimulations of the work of art. The water that spurts out

from the artistically wrought statue both nourishes the beauty of the garden and flows beyond its confines, where it will work for the landowner. Like the tales of the *Decameron*, composed of artistically nourished flowers of speech, the garden is an aesthetically wrought representation of the world of creation, with its same bounties and dangers. The frame of the *Decameron* separates the world of pleasure and beauty from the world of utility and work, just as much as it links them, acting as both the water channels and the walls of the garden.

If the poetics of the *Decameron* suggests a connection between aesthetics and ethics in consonance with Boccaccio's theory of poetry in the *Genealogia*, then it also offers the opportunity to reflect on higher matters through the ballads that conclude each day. Like a prosimetrum, the *Decameron* gives rise to a tension between the linguistic and historical verisimilitude of the prose tales and the contemplative language and themes of lyric poetry in the ballads. One example of how the frame dramatizes this tension is again from Day III. In this day's concluding ballad, Lauretta sings of the travails of a woman, whose true love dies and goes to reside 'in heaven . . . before Him who created us' (§17). The rest of the poem concerns her regret at having settled for the love of the young man despite her desire to reside with her lover on high. Her initial experience of love is framed by the notion of divine love, as her beauty is described in terms of its connection to God, who destined her 'to show men here on earth | some sign of [His] eternal grace' (§13; p. 281). The lyrics of the ballad, written in a language reminiscent of stilnovist poetry and of Dante's *Comedy*, show the tenuous metaphorical connection between human and divine love. Like the tales of the *Decameron*, the lyric moments of the ballads, which are themselves popular songs accompanied by instruments and embodied by dance, can be interpreted in multiple ways. The *brigata*'s reaction to this particular ballad points to the ambiguity of interpretation inherent even in the language of the lyric:

Here Lauretta ended her song, to which all had listened raptly and which all had construed in different ways. There were those who took it, in the Milanese fashion, to imply that a good fat pig was better than a comely wench. But others gave it a more sublime, more subtle and truer meaning, which this is not the moment to expound. (§18; p. 283, modified)

Whereas the literal Milanese-style interpretation fits the context of the *brigata*'s purpose, the author refuses to report the sublime interpretation because it belongs outside the garden-world of the work. The poetics of the *Decameron* depends on a layered discourse that separates the author and

reader from the storytellers, placing the onus of the production of meaning on the reader.

The basic linguistic and narrative verisimilitude of the tales of the *Decameron* betrays an artistically wrought representation of the world of creation. By framing the stories within multiple contexts, Boccaccio is able to suggest a connection between the everyday language of an embodied, historical reality and the rarefied lyric artifice that veils sublime truths. With the *Decameron* Boccaccio fully develops the poetics tested in his earlier works, in which he endeavoured to combine the historical narratives and popular language of the vernacular tradition with the language and forms of poetry inherited from Roman antiquity. Almost always ostensibly concerned with pleasure and beauty, Boccaccio engages obliquely with sublime allegorical meanings from the embodied perspective of history. The broad gamut of Boccaccio's poetic production shows his commitment to expanding the range of the literary Tuscan vernacular and to creating a new vernacular poetics capable of reaching multiple types of readers, from the intellectual to the merchant, stimulating in them reflection on things human and divine.

NOTES

- 1 Trans. by Osgood, pp. 38–9, modified. Whenever I have made minor changes to cited translations, I have noted it 'modified'. Unless marked with page numbers, the translations are my own.
- 2 *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. by Robert M. Durling, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), I, 174–5; Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, XI, 71; p. 469.
- 3 Branca, 'Introduzione', in *Filostrato*, in *Tutte le opere*, II (1964), 3–13 (p. 11).
- 4 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Magliabechiano, VIII, 1416; *Cantari del Trecento*, ed. by Armando Balduino (Milan: Marzorati, 1970), pp. 19–21; 38; *Il cantare di Fiorio e Biancifiore*, ed. by Vincenzo Crescini, 2 vols (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1969), I, 16–24.
- 5 Armando Balduino, 'Introduzione', in *Ninfale fiesolano*, in *Tutte le opere*, III (1974), 269–89 (p. 281).
- 6 Antonio Enzo Quaglio, 'Introduzione', in *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, in *Tutte le opere*, II (1964), 667–77 (p. 674).
- 7 Janet Levarie Smarr, 'Introduction', in *Eclogues* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp. viii–lxxvi.
- 8 Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale e nuovi studi sul 'Decameron'*, rev. edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1996), p. 51.
- 9 Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, p. 71.
- 10 Macrobius, *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*, I, 2, 7–11, in *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. by William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 84–5.
- 11 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition, trans. by W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 203–31.

- 12 Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's 'Decameron'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 70.
- 13 Millicent Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the 'Decameron'* (Saratoga: Anna Libri, 1979), pp. 4–5; James C. Kriesel, 'The Genealogy of Boccaccio's Theory of Allegory', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 36 (2009), 197–226 (p. 223).